

Theology has become a hot-button topic among lay people over the past decades, as scholars and popular authors from a variety of faith traditions put forth different conceptions of the Divine. Here's a sampling of titles, *God: A Biography*, *Who Needs God? For Those Who Can't Believe*, *This is My God*, *Man's Quest for God*, *God in Search of Man*, *Leave a Little to God* are but a few of the myriad books on the market dealing with our relationship to the Almighty.

For us as Jews perhaps the most frequently used metaphor for God is that of sovereign. The Torah and the *Siddur* describe the Holy One as *melekh* -- king, ruler. Indeed the notion is enshrined in the formula of each and every *brakha*: *Barukh atah . . . Melekh Ha-olam*, Ruler of the Universe.

Another popular image of the Eternal views God as a teacher. In one Talmudic understanding of the afterlife, the souls of the righteous study with none other than that Professor of all Professors, the good Lord Himself. In the words of the weekday *Amidah*, God is *honen da'at*, the One who bestows understanding and confers knowledge. The power of this metaphor lies in its recognition that the mind can function in service of God, hte clear thinking offers a way to apprehend the cosmic wonder of creation, the grandeur of the world in which we live.

Still another venerable metaphor for the Almighty is that of warrior. In last week's *sedra*, God is depicted in *Shirat Hayam*, the Song of the Sea, as *ish milhama*, "a man of war" who stikes out at Pharoah and the oppressors of Israel with an outstretched arm and a mighty hand. In the spirit of Bob Dylan's famous song *God on our Side*, it might be jarring to modern sensibilities to think of the Author of Creation as a combatant, but Judaism understands that a passion for justice sometimes involves a willingness to fight against evil and suffering, that peace at the cost of oppression is nothing less than a rationalization of wrongdoing.

There are hundreds of different metaphors describing God found throughout the Torah, Talmud, *Midrash*, traditional Jewish philosophy and the work of modern thinkers such as Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig and Mordecai Kaplan, to name only a few. Open a Reconstructionist prayer book and you will find references to the Divine that include *Mekor Hayyim*, "Source of

Life,” or “The Eternal Power that Makes for Salvation.” Since God eludes ultimate understanding, because the Holy One is unique, and because our own human conditions change so much day-in and day-out, there is no perfect way to describe God absolutely. To talk about the Almighty requires the use of metaphors, since all discussion of Providence is at best an approximation.

That having been said, one of my favorite metaphors for our relationship with God comes from this week’s Torah reading. The portion tells of the thrilling moment when the Jewish people gather at the foot of Mount Sinai to receive Torah. Atop the mountain, amidst thunder and lightning, clouds spread out. The people stand behind Moshe, who climbs to the summit and enters the canopy of clouds. There, alone with God, he receives *Luhot Habrit*, the engraved tablets bearing the Ten Commandments.

The ancient midrashic work known as *Mekhilta d’Rabbi Yishmael* comments, “ה' מסיני” -- This teaches that God went forth from Sinai to meet Israel like a bridegroom who goes forth to greet the bride” (*Masekhta D’bahodesh, parshat Yitro*, chapter 3). In other words, God marries our ancestors at Sinai! Moses, so to speak, stands there as the “best man,” while the tablets of the covenant are the *ketubah*, the wedding contract binding God and the Jewish people in a public ceremony of love and mutual caring. In the thematic spirit of coupling, each of the first five commandments of the Decalogue is paired with one of the last five -- number one with six, number two with seven, and so on. That the second commandment, “To refrain from idolatry,” is paired with the seventh, “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” is hardly accidental. Idolatry is nothing less than cheating on God; even as adultery is so often a form of idolatry, the worship of lust rather than love.

The idea of God as our spouse is found throughout the literature of the Bible. Each weekday morning as a person dons *Tefillin*, the strap is wrapped around one’s middle finger as a verse from Hosea is recited, “And I will betroth you forever; I will betroth you with righteousness and justice, goodness and mercy; and I will betroth you with faithfulness and you shall know the Lord” (*Hosea 2:21*). It is a moment of ritual that deliberately mimics the act of

marriage underneath the *huppah*. That Hosea uses the term *la-da'at Ado--nai*" to "know" God, is suggestive of what the Bible means when it states that Adam "knew" Eve. Read *Shir Hashirim*, the Song of Songs, and its suggestive love poetry and you'll find a powerful allegory of the longing and love of God for the His beloved, Israel. Consider the erotica of the *Kabbalah*, which envisions a cosmic union between *Tifferet* and *Malkhut*, the spheres that represent masculine and feminine, God and Israel, and you will see the same.

If you think about it, it's a remarkable idea. The metaphor of Sinai as marriage indicates that the core of our relationship with God is the consequence of a mutual love affair. God loves us, and we respond by loving God in return.

Every good marriage periodically hearkens back to the courtship which established the heart of the relationship between husband and wife. Indeed, once a year on *Shavu'ot* we play back our wedding video, so to speak, as we read the account of Revelation at Sinai on the date of our anniversary, that annual remembrance of the moment we were joined in matrimony with God. Two other times during the year, once in the winter and again the summer, as we encounter the giving of Torah as recorded *Parshat Yitro* and *Parshat Va-ethanan*, we also play our wedding video -- much like a couple might choose to do so every now and then for no reason at all . . . which, sometimes, is the best reason of all.

Yet none of us, even those with the happiest of marriages, would want to play our wedding videos every day. Not because the day of our marriage was unimportant, but because none of us inhabit that plane on a daily basis. In like fashion, that the recitation of the Ten Commandments isn't a part of our daily public liturgy isn't a reflection of their insignificance, God forbid; but rather a reminder that Sinai was but the foundation of a relationship that is on-going between ourselves and the Holy One.

Good marriages require that both partners make a commitment to respond to each other's needs and grow with one another. As spouses, we agree to take responsibility for each other, to offer care and support in times of need. And always at the core of a strong relationship, there is a love that grows deeper as the years go by.

So it is with the Jewish people and God. The initial commitments and responsibilities that formalized our relationship are codified in the Torah. But openness to growth and new experiences has resulted in a dynamic and vibrant relationship -- just as it would for any loving couple. Judaism has continued to grow and develop from the time of the Torah's giving, as we and God continue to discover more and more about one another.

In precisely the same way, we as individuals must also grow and discover more about God and our relationship with the Divine. But should we respond with a shrug, saying, "I know all I need to know, I am about as committed as I ever intend to be," what we are really saying is that our relationship with God and Judaism is bereft of passion, grown old and stale, replaced by mechanical gestures and rote thinking. We know that marriages can grow boring and as often as not die from malnourishment as from genuine dislike. The empty-nesters who, without children at home, discover they have little in common and less to talk about. The couples so busy pursuing their separate careers they have little time and less energy to work toward their relationship. Maintaining a relationship with God is no different than with a loved one of the human variety; not to grow it is to diminish it. Speaking not as a rabbi, a "professional Jew," but merely as a human being striving to enhance my own relationship with the Divine, I periodically look to add new spiritual practices to my life as a way of fostering a different dimension of intimacy with the Eternal One. If you have done "the same old same old" with your religious life for many years now, I urge you to venture forth from the world of habit and complacency. Add one thing to your Shabbat observance, put on Tefillin once a month, celebrate a Yom Tov you never have before. If none of us would want our relationships with spouses to grow monotonous, why wouldn't we want the same for our relationship with God?

There would be far fewer divorces in this world were more couples to realize that love is a decision, not simply a feeling, a verb rather than a noun. At the core of any marriage, beyond the changes, there is something which remains constant -- the mutual obligation to care and respond, a willingness to receive the needs of the other as commandments. Because I love my wife, I respond to her needs by trying to make them my own. I decide to act loving, even when I don't feel loving. And because we are in a marriage with God, we are asked to take on God's priorities -- the *mitzvot* -- as our own; we are called upon to make a commitment, even when we

may not feel like it. That so many Jews feel disenfranchised from Jewish life is partly to blame on the well-intentioned, but unimaginative religious establishment. But they who are divorced from Judaism today also bear responsibility. Spirituality requires an active decision to make a commitment, to work at the relationship, to be a partner and not merely a recipient; The marriages that have the greatest meaning and staying power are never one-way streets.

And so my friends, today we took out the old wedding video, we listened sweetly to the music that joined our ancestors to God under the *huppah* of Sinai's sky in times long ago. How young our people were! How much time has elapsed since those halcyon days! Like Tevye and Golda of *Fiddler* fame, after 3,000 years of marriage to God we really are the proverbial old couple. But in the fullness of time our relationship to the Holy One has matured like fine wine, it has a complexity and understanding that the ardor of youth never captures. As the poet Robert Browning once noted to Elizabeth Barrett, the great love of his life, "Come grow old with me, the best is yet to be." So too with our marriage to God, if we are willing to make it so.